

**GENDER, LANGUAGE AND THE QUEST FOR A  
TAMIL IDENTITY: A STUDY OF THE POLITICS  
AND PERSONA OF NEELAMBIKAI AMMAIYAR**

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**GENDER, LANGUAGE AND THE QUEST FOR A TAMIL IDENTITY:**

## **A STUDY OF THE POLITICS AND PERSONA OF NEELAMBIKAI AMMAIYAR**

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The politics and persona of Neelambikai Ammaiyar can be seen as the site of an encounter between emerging personhood, resurgent Tamil identity as well as women's agency in society and politics. The inherent tensions in negotiating one's identity as a woman and one's understanding of personhood with one's identity as a Tamil is compounded by the larger picture of the nationalist struggle. . The Tamil quest for identity and self-expression vis-a-vis the English colonial masters as well as the Sanskrit/Hindi domination implicit in the Congress ideology was met primarily by the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam. In the case of Neelambikai the site of emotion, cultural identity and conflict, is clearly perceived as that of the body and emotions of Neelmbikai located primarily within the ambience of the *Tani Tamizh Iyakkam* of which she was the co-founder.

The nomenclature 'Tani Tamizh Iyakkam' can be translated literally as 'separate Tamil movement'. Its apparent manifestation was linguistic separatism or 'a movement towards purification of Tamil'. Its political and cultural dimensions take off from this crucial point of difference. The Tani Tamizh Iyakkam was marked chiefly by emotional in fact passionate worship of Tamil personified in the "Tamil Tai" (literally 'Tamil Mother). In fact the titleThe Tani Tamizh Iyakkam can be defined as the Tamil ethno-nationalist movement which did not merely claim separateness from the 'mainstream' Congress led nationalist struggle but in fact moved parallel to it and represented "a counter culture". It can be perceived as the beginnings of Tamil personhood which has persistently struggled

against the domination of the centre in terms of Congress ideology, linguistic chauvenism of the Hindi belt and unequal resource allocation.

The Tamil ethno-nationalist movement was a very significant development in Tamil Nadu politics from the 1920's to the 1940's although it was by no means the only politico-cultural movement of that period.

Tani Tamizh Iyakkam represented not only the major strand in the transitional years in Madras politics but emerged as the most important post-colonial discourse in Tamil Nadu. The Tamil freedom movement also provided pointers for the post-colonial developments in Tamil Nadu, especially the foundations of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam as well as the intensifying anti-Hindi, anti-Brahmin agitations that persist to this day. In a sense then, the sense of personhood of the Tamils during the transitional years between colonialism and post-colonialism in Tamil Nadu was dominated by this movement which perceived northern domination and the use of Hindi as internal colonialism and juxtaposed Tamil language and Tamil cultural Identity against Hindi oppression as much as British colonial oppression.

Gender related issues and women's participation/ non-participation in the political movements within the region had formed a major plank of all political and social agencies. This was as true of the Theosophical movement in the later part of the nineteenth century as it was of the Congress and non-cooperation or the Justice party and the Self Respect movement. . Gender politics within Tamilaham presented a fragmented picture. Some Tamil women took recourse to what they considered the progressive potential within Westernisation and avidly read "progressive" writers of the West and expressed their views in English. Operating primarily though not entirely,

within the Theosophical movement, these women rejected the British colonial rule at one level but at another level sincerely believed that British liberal ideas were crucial for India's progress in general and Indian women's emancipation in particular.

In the case of Tamil women, the quest for personhood and identity was complicated by the mediation of patriarchy in the overall discourse of culture and identity. Those Tamil women who wrote and perhaps thought in Tamil came largely under the influence of the Justice Party and the Self Respect movement<sup>1</sup>. These women eventually came under the influence of the *Tani Tamizh Iyakkam*. A strong nexus thus became established between anti-Brahmanism and women's issues. And yet these women were themselves the products of a patriarchal society and hence unable to articulate entirely in the voice of women. The resultant tensions get reflected in a peculiar situation, where they constantly express their anguish over women's miseries, arising out of a patriarchal order such as destitution, widowhood, illiteracy, etc. Yet they continue to sing the paeans of wifely devotion and modesty and chastity in women. Thus they seek imaginary solutions for gender inequality, rather than locating the cause in the social structure itself. A close look at gender politics and literature at the moment of "transition" would then seem to suggest that the problem with Tamil society in general and Tamil women in particular was not so much 'cultural amnesia' as cultural schizophrenia<sup>2</sup>. In other words Tamil women in the eventful era of political and social transition stood at the cultural cross roads of emotion and identity.

This essay is an attempt to situate intellectually alive and socially and politically active women who seem to have stood at cultural cross-roads in the decades preceeding independence. The life of Neelambikai Ammaiyar, one of the more enigmatic figures of

those times is used as the template for such a study. I shall here explore the writings of Neelambikai Ammaiyar, her politics and persona as the site of such a cultural crossroads of personhood, identity and women's agency.

This essay is at one level, an attempt to deconstruct the life of Neelambikai Ammaiyar from a hagiographic text, that of Tirunavukkarasu. At another level it seeks to situate the subject within the problematic of her times through the medium of her political and social commitments as seen through the quasi-biographical text by Sarada Nambi Arooran titled —*Neelambikai Ammaiyarin Samuga Chintanaigal*<sup>3</sup>. Lastly, the gender concerns of Neelambikai Ammaiyar's generation and her own personal predicaments have been explored through her subjectivity revealed in her biographies of women. It is noteworthy that almost two-thirds of her writings were devoted to biographies.

Neelambikai Ammaiyar was born at Nagapattinam on the sixth of August 1903 to Vedachalam Pillai (Maraimalai Adigal) and Saundaravalli Ammaiyar. She was named Neelambikai after the presiding deity of the temple known as Neelayathatchi. The emotional fragmentation she would undergo throughout her life was reflected in the first days of her birth. After naming her 'Neelambikai' her father, the co-founder and great votary of the *Tani Tamizh Iyakkam*, tried his best to Tamilise her name as 'Karuppamma' but to no avail. Neela whom her brother fondly calls 'The Mother of *Tani Tamizh Iyakkam*' in his biography of her,<sup>4</sup> was caught in the trap of nomenclature and despite her loyalty to Tamil, would respond only to 'Neela' and not 'Karuppamma'. In an interview with Mangaiyarkkarasiyar, the sister-in-law of Neelambikai Ammaiyar, (9<sup>th</sup> Dec.2002), I was told that the change of name officially

never occurred in the case of Neelambikai although her father had made a successful transition from Vedachalam to Maraimalai.

Neelambikai Ammaiyar's writings and political opinions have survived the cruel silencing of women's voices which has largely been their fate in history, thanks ironically and perhaps inevitably to three men – Maraimalai Adigal her father who enabled her to publish 'Tani Tamizh Katturaigal' her first collection of articles in 1926, Tiruvaranga Pillai her husband who published the rest of her prolific writings (amounting to thirteen books) and Tirunavukkarasu her brother who became her biographer. This short biography published in 1946 is no more than a hundred odd pages in sharp contrast to Tirunavakkarasu's biography of his father which runs into 877 pages! His work published in 1945, the year she died, is hagiographic in nature and in fact prefixed by adulatory condolence messages. The brief profile hides much more than it reveals although the personal and political predicament of Neelambikai Ammaiyar is present as a palimpsest throughout the text. Sarada Nambiarooran who got her M. Phil degree from Bharati Dasan University working on Neelambikai Ammaiyar restored this gender imbalance by publishing her partial biography in 1990. Obviously however a thesis devolving around the ideas of Neelambikai cannot become a substitute for a full fledged biography.

Neelambikai Ammaiyar's difficult times and more difficult choices are therefore best recovered from her own biographies of both Western and Tamil women, both the choice of subject and the framing of each facet of the biography in terms of her own experience as a woman and a political thinker. These writings are to be seen in conjunction with the sub-text of Tirunavukkarasu's narrative. Tirunavukkarasu's

biography of his sister Neelambikai Ammaiyar as well as her own self-reflexive writings, provide the most perceptible site of the inter-play of conflicting emotions and fragmented identities that characterised her personality.

### **To be a Woman and a Tamil at the Turn of the Century: Neela's Early Years**

Neelambikai had an excellent education at home necessitated by her withdrawal from school due to ill health. She was grounded almost equally well in English and in Hindi as she was in Tamil. She was an avid reader of Shakespeare and the poems of Tennyson and Wordsworth. Her interest in the Hindi languages leaned largely towards devotional literature and the songs of Kabir, Meera and others, which she sang before appreciative Tamil audiences.

In many of her attitudes, opinions and anxieties regarding women, her writings partially conflate the literary and social self-expression of Subbalakshmi Akka and Panditai Krishnaveni Ammaiyar both of whom guided her education through school. In fact, Neelambikai stayed in the women's hostel and later in the widows' home run by them and studied in the girl's school which they had established. Her almost fanatical devotion to Tamil language and literature, and correspondingly her animosity towards Hindi and English, both of which represented to her alien domination, was, undoubtedly, influenced by these two women, although Neelambikai in her quest for Tamil purity went even further.

Neelambikai's sound knowledge English accounts for her many translations from English to Tamil. As early as 1937 she compiled a Hindi- Tamil dictionary in which more than 7,000 technical terms in Sanskrit/Hindi were provided with a Tamil equivalent. She undertook a difficult exercise – the publication in 1931 of *Six Hundred*

*Parallel Proverbs in Tamil and English* - to show that the English language did not have anything more to offer than the Tamil language in terms of the richness of its vocabulary, its idioms or its literary traditions.

The inter-textual influences clearly perceptible in the writings of Neelambikai draw their sustenance from such diverse sources as the writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe in the United States and Harriet Martineau in England (who is credited with having authored as many as 1624 essays!); the Tamil devotional traditions of the **Tevaram**, **Tiruvachagam** and the spiritual writings of Ramalinga Adigal; the political and social treatises of E.V. Ramaswami Naicker and the training in Tamil language and tradition provided by her father Maraimalai Adigal.

Passages in Tirunavukkarasu's biography about Neelabikai's early training in Tamil texts by her father, are both moving and revealing. There were no fixed hours of study and the days Neela cooked his favourite dishes well, she would be taught a few lessons from Tamil classics like *Silappadikaram*, *Purananuru*, *Nannul*, *Villiputhurar Bharatam* etc. This too only after her enthusiasm had dissolved into tears. The biographer's chapter on Neela's education is aptly titled 'Father's Mischief and Daughter's Sorrow' (p.8-11). Learning against such odds Neelambikai Ammaiyar delivered her first public lecture in 1916 when she was thirteen on the theme of 'Parental Duties'. The script was the father's. Emotional rupture between father and daughter occurred when, not content with scripting her early lectures, Maraimalai Adigal sought to script her personal life as well.

### **Cultural Loyalty and Assertion of Linguistic Identity**

The strong anti-Hindi, Tamil chauvinist tone of Neelambikai's essays shows the influence of women like Ambujammal, Krishnaveni Ammaiyar and Akka Subbalakshmi as also the conflation of ideas drawn from Maraimalai Adigal and Periyar. Neelambikai's anti-Sanskrit/Hindi and pro-Tamil/Draavidian essays earned her the honorific *Tani Tamizh Tiruvatti*. Her essays reflect her antagonism not only towards Sanskrit or Hindi as a language, but also to the entire processes of Sanskritization and Brahmanization which she looks upon as the cause of Tamil decadence. Making the point that intrusion of an alien language is inextricably linked with cultural invasion, Neelambikai shows that while the texts of the "Second Sangam" like *Tolkappiyam*, *Kalithogai* or *Ahananuru* and *Purananuru* contain a miniscule percentage of Sanskritic terms, the texts of the later Sangam period like the entire *Kizhkanakku* literature contain Sanskrit words in abundance. ('*Tani Tamizh Padukappu*' in '*Tani Tamizh Katturaigal*' pp 46-47 ff).

The repeated emphasis of Neelambikai and others involved in the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam on the *Tolkappiyam* and other indigenous texts is to be explained by the fact that Tamil has always had its own tradition of poetics. For example, the use of *aham* (the interior) and *puram* (the exterior) as the primary literary modes and the systematic use of poetic themes or moods in consonance with the five *tinai*s (eco-zones) enumerated in the *Tolkappiyam* and elsewhere are strongly rooted in the Tamil *bhasha* tradition.

Neelambikai gives a number of examples like *bhasha*, *brahmanar*, *jati*, *raja*, *manithar*, etc. to show how Sanskritic terms and Sanskritic notions have intruded into the Tamil language. She adds that Brahmins began to define Sanskrit as "girvani" and "deva

vani”, to reflect the cultural superiority of Brahmins ('Tani Tamizh Padukappu' literally 'protection to pure Tamil' in Tani Tamizh Katturaigal – pp.50-54). If one were to logically extend Neelambikai's argument in feminist terms, the beginnings of patriarchal notions like the purity-pollution polarities, women as ensnarements and the virtues of female chastity (karpu) are found in abundance in the *Kural* and *Naladiyar*. Both belong to the late Sangam period when Brahmanical-Sanskritic influence was contending for social space with the indigenous Tamil culture. In contrast the literature of the early Sangam age which has a sizeable contribution by women coming from diverse social backgrounds (Auvaiyar [Panar minstrel caste], Kakkai, Patiniyar, Ilaiveniyar, Venni Kuyattiyar [potter caste], etc.) reflects the values of a matrilineal society ('Kalviyum Taimarum' [Literacy and Women] and 'Ozhungana Kalvi' [Right Education] in Tani Tamizh Katturaigal: 1925:pp1 to 12).

It is obvious that Neelambikai herself was the product of a cultural pastiche. She had a deep knowledge and admiration of both English and Hindi literature and yet her ideological/political commitments enjoined upon her the condemnation of both. This results in what can best be described as cultural schizophrenia<sup>5</sup>. Interestingly the same cultural tension is to be perceived in her father Maraimalai Adigal. He was an avid reader of the English Classics and corresponded with G.U.Pope who has been responsible for some of the finest translations of Hindu religious texts including the *Tiruvachagam*. Tirunavukkarasu in his biography of Neelambikai comments that Adigal looking upon the face of his infant daughter would say, “Neela's face has the brilliance of geniuses like Shelley and Shakespeare” (Tirunavukkarasu:Neelambikai:1945). It is also noteworthy that the co-founder of Tani

Tamizh Iyakkam translated Kalidasa's Sanskrit play *Shakuntalam* into Tamil! The tricky problem of cultural negotiation between an admiration for English as the signifier of Western rationality and of Sanskrit as the language of Indian classical tradition on the one hand and the location of one's own Tamil identity in one's Dravidian roots on the other, gets carried into the persona of Neelambikai. Her own upbringing in a culture that was more pastiche than pure, makes her a prime example of cultural fragmentation and cultural negotiations.

As early as 1937 Neelambikai compiled a Hindi- Tamil dictionary in which more than 7,000 technical terms in Sanskrit/Hindi were provided with a Tamil equivalent. She undertook a somewhat similar exercise to show that the English language did not have anything more to offer than the Tamil language in terms of the richness of its vocabulary, its idioms or its literary traditions. Her book *Six Hundred Parallel Proverbs in Tamil and English* was published in 1931. Her long essay 'Tamizhil Vadamozhi Kalakkal Agathu states her ambivalent situation:

*"Is it better to use Tamil in its pristine pure form or to use the common parlance which is an admixture [of Sanskrit and Tamil) to create literary pieces? ...The water we drink contains germs which are **naturally** found but we **artificially filter it to remove these germs**. So the language we speak **which spontaneously acquires alien vocabulary (emphasis mine)** must be distilled to produce pure literary Tamil.<sup>6</sup>"* (Tani Tamizh Katturaigal:p.25. Translation mine)

She realises that the Sanskritisation of one's vocabulary and the Brahmanisation of one's culture was the "natural" result of the prolonged historical association between Tamil and Sanskrit, between the "Adi Dravida" Tamils and the "Aryanized" Tamil

Brahmins. Although **this composite culture is reflected in her own thinking and writing**, she still attempts the painful transition to “pure Tamil” in her politics, social philosophy and literary writings. The degree of pastiche can be seen in the fact that despite her fanatical zeal to purge Tamil of any Sanskritic traces, her own name continued to be palpably Sanskritic, i.e. ‘Neelambikai’.

Another essay by Neelambikai is titled “eschewing the use of northern language (Sanskrit/Hindi) in Tamil” (*Tamizhil Vadamozhi Kalakkal Agadu*). Condemning the metaphor used by some of her contemporaries of Tamil and Sanskrit as constituting the eyes of the Tamil literary face, she feels that Brahmins have patronized and monopolised Sanskrit to their exclusive social advantage. Hence, she further argues in her essay ‘Tamizhnadum Tamizh Mozhiyum Munneruvathu Eppadi?’ (‘ How can Tamil Nadu and Tamil Language Develop?’), a lengthy special lecture/pamphlet by Neelambikai Ammaiyar), that the emergence of a tradition that is a confluence of Sanskrit and Tamil would be detrimental not only to the cause of Tamil but to Tamilians.

Perhaps Neelambikai’s major contribution to the enrichment of the Tamil language was her Hindi- Tamil Dictionary (*Vadatchol-Tamil Agara Varisai*) in which she provides Tamil equivalents for over seven thousand words in Sanskrit/Hindi. One of the verses lamenting the untimely death of Neelambikai says:

*Neelambikai,*

*The one who sowed the seeds of pure Tamil*

*in Tamil soil, harvesting good texts,*

*through prolific use of Tamil*

*subduing, crushing the pride of northern language....*<sup>7</sup>

However, apart from her anti-Hindi tirade Neelambikai does not seem to have done any political writing. Surprisingly she does not attack British imperialism with the same vigour with which she attacks 'Northern' domination.

### **Gendering Personhood, Tamil Identity and Social Concerns in Neelambikai**

Neelambikai's writings which concern women's issues are however quite prolific. She expresses her strong faith in education for women and states that women should aim at the level of erudition which someone like Auvaiyar possessed, a wisdom which enabled her to write normative texts for the broad guidance of Tamil society. Her essay on the process by which the land of the Tamils and the Tamil language could move forward<sup>8</sup>, contains extensive passages on women's education where she lays stress on Tamil. She says that modern Tamil women should emulate the example of the Sangam poets like Auvaiyar, Kakkai Pattiniyar, Ponnudiyar, Vellividiyar and others (*Tamizhnadum Tamizhmozhiyum Munneruvathu Eppadi*:23). To quote Neelambikai:

*"Our language is called Mother Tongue, our land is Mother Land,  
knowledge is [feminised] as Kalaimagal and wealth as 'Tirumagal'.*

(*Tamizhnadum Tamizh Mozhiyum Munneruvathu Eppadi*: p.12)

Neelambikai emphasizes, in particular, the need to wean Tamil women away from western education and to familiarise them with women in spiritual literature<sup>9</sup>. This is the avowed purpose of her text *Muppenmanigal Varalaru*.

These sentiments are seminal to the emergence and gendering of Tamil nationalism. The iconic representation of Tamil as a woman was crucial to the whole issue of gender participation in the freedom struggle in Tamil Nadu. The feminising of the language gave women an advantage over men in taking a lead role in the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam<sup>10</sup>. In fact it was in the 1940's, the years of transition from colonialism to freedom, that Neelambikai was conferred the title 'Tani Tamizh Tiruvatti'.

Neelambikai in her essays (*Tani Tamizh Katturaigal*) also opposes the re-marriage of widows over twenty, although she, like her father Maraimalai Adigal, does support the re-marriage of child widows. Condemning the practice so widely prevalent in the West, Neelambikai holds forth to her women readers the example of Harriet Martineau who never married on losing her fiancée but chose to devote herself to literature. Neelambikai advocates a similar career in education and authorship to young Indian widows<sup>11</sup>. However, she condemns the practice of Sati in unequivocal terms and in an essay titled "The living in the House of Death and Their Visitors" ('Irandor Veetitrkku Chelbavarum Avveetinarum'- *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal* ) she strongly attacks the attitude of a woman who sells all her resources to placate Brahmins and perform rituals in order to procure salvation for her husband and ends up destitute.

A major aspect of Neelambikai's life that is discussed by both Tirunavukkarasu as well as Sharada Nambi Arooran is her political activism in women's causes. She participated in virtually all the women's conferences held in Tamil Nadu, both before and after her marriage. In fact she founded the 'Saiva Madar Sangam' in 1942 in Palayankottai, Tirunelveli which despite its religious garb actively engaged with women's issues, especially education and social reform. Her outstanding essay on 'How can Tamil

Nadu and Tamil Language Develop' was originally a long speech delivered at the women's conference in 1938.

### **Emotion and Angst in Neelambikai—Humanitarian Concerns**

While she uses the biographical mode as well as public speeches (printed subsequently as essays) to express her concern for the plight of Indian women as shown by her biographical sketches in *Menaattu Penmanigal* (book I and II) as well as *Muppenmanigal Varalaru*, Neelambikai's broader concerns go beyond women's issues. Her anguish over child labour comes through in her biographies of Elizabeth Browning as well as Harriet Beecher Stowe. The issue of slavery, which Stowe tackles through factual reporting (as in her account of the Dred Scott case) as well as fiction (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) not only receives a sympathetic handling in her biography by Neelambikai, but also finds an echo in her own writings in Tamil. In her strident anti-Aryan essay titled 'The Ancient inhabitants of Navalan Teevu' (*Navalanteevin Pazhaiya Kudigal*), in *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal*: pp79-86), she wonders what construes cultural superiority. What justified the Aryans stigmatising Dravidians as "dasyus" or the Brahmins denigrating the hunting, meat-eating tribals as barbarians? (pp.79-86).

Sarada Nambi Arooran effectively reconstructs the social persona of Neelambikai Ammaiyar. Her text is a meticulous analysis of the various writings of Neelambikai Ammaiyar classified under such heads as 'Reflections on Language', 'Observations on the Feminine' 'Thoughts on Religion' and so on. There is also for the first time an attempt to place her within the historical canvas in the chapter on 'The Historical Times of Ammaiyar and the Beginnings of the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam.'. Unlike the other histories of this movement which marginalise the role of Neelambikai she

redresses the imbalance in her doctoral thesis on the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam: Emergence and Growth' published by the Chekkizhar Press, Chennai in 1994. However Sarada Nambi Arooran's text fails to bring a critical perspective to this study of Neelambikai Ammaiyar and borders on the hagiographical. The main reason for this is that the text developed out of an M.Phil. dissertation where biographical chiaroscuro has no place. As with the narrative of Tirunavukkarasu, the muffling of all personal nuances of Neelambikai's life is understandable in view of the proximity of both to the subject of their research. However the author expressed the view (Interview with the author, 9<sup>th</sup> Dec 2002) that there must have been a lot of personal pain in Neelambikai's life. She made the interesting admission that perhaps she (that is Dr. Nambi Arooran) had not been allowed to interact with Neelambikai's children (while researching on this book) because of the unpleasant truths that may come out.

Neelambikai's emotional identification with maternity on the one hand and her strong urge towards political activism on the other such as participation in long marches in women's anti-imperialist rallies, resulted in much physical suffering. Mangaiyarkarasiyar said (interview with the author, 9<sup>th</sup> Dec.2002) that when Neela went for the women's conference and subsequent anti-British, anti-Hindi demonstration in 1938, she was holding her four month old daughter in her arms.

Neelambikai herself found great emotional satisfaction in her eleven children and her biographer Tirunavukkarasu writes that her books were written while she was carrying one child and cradling another in her arms (*Neelambikai Ammaiyar*: 1945:39 to 42 Translation mine). The passage is worth quoting:

*“Herewith an example of Ammaiyar’s patience. One day Ammaiyar was researching material for her writing. Four or five (sic) came running towards her. One climbed on to her lap clamouring for milk; one asked to be fed rice; one complained that he (her brother) pulled her hair and one ran away with her pen; a lot of noise, shouting and crying. Marai Tirunavukkarasu [ie. The biographer] came down the stairs on hearing the racket and asked in an angry tone, ‘what’s all this going on here, sister?’. She responded with a smile, ‘Aren’t they charming? This is true happiness, the fruit of all my prayers...”*

In a moving passage Tirunavukkarasu describes how Neelambikai in her advanced state of pregnancy completed one of her books and delivered her baby within a few days of it. When he advised her not to strain she is purported to have said, “who knows. I might deliver tomorrow and this book needs to be finished now” (*Neelambikai Ammaiyar:1945:78*).

A strong autobiographical tone is perceptible in her life of Harriet Beecher Stowe. She admires the manner in which Stowe negotiated between her social concerns, her many political writings and the upbringing of six children. Her books were written after her children went to sleep. Neelambikai paraphrases Stowe as writing to her husband,:

*“You want me to be a successful writer. Will I be able to do so with small children to look after **and no room of my own?**”*

(Harriet Beecher Stowe)

In concluding the life of Harriet Beecher Stowe Ammaiyar, Neelambikai writes that her book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and her many writings (including the celebrated *Dred Scott*

case) on the horrors of enslaving mothers by forcibly separating them from their infants, transformed public opinion in America. The very first print of her book sold three thousand copies! Here was a shining ideal of a woman who was a loving wife and mother and a tireless campaigner against slavery. It would, perhaps, not be out of place to comment that during her fifteen years of marriage Neelambikai conceived thirteen times. She took care of her home and children and wrote thirteen books.

### **Parting Ways—Political and Personal**

*Tani Tamizh Iyakkam* started by Neelambikai Ammaiyar and her father Maraimalai Adigal became the signifier of Tamil identity. In it crystallized the Tamil quest for its own distinctive self-expression vis-à-vis the English speaking, westernized intellectuals and the Sanskrit/Hindi oriented Congress followers. The anti-imperial struggle in Tamil Nadu came to be dominated by Tamil renaissance and Dravidian nationalism in the context of what then used to be the Madras Presidency. The Tamil ethno-nationalist movement was a very significant development in Tamil Nadu politics from the 1920's to the 1940's. The *Tani Tamizh Iyakkam* did not merely claim separateness from the 'mainstream' Congress led nationalist struggle but in fact moved parallel to it and represented "a counter culture". It can be perceived as the beginnings of Tamil separatism which has persistently struggled against the domination of the centre in terms of Congress ideology, linguistic domination of the Hindi belt and unequal resource allocation. The Tamil freedom movement also provided pointers for the post-colonial developments in Tamil Nadu, especially the foundations of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhangam as well as the intensifying anti-Hindi, anti-Brahmin agitations which persist to this day.

The nomenclature 'Tani Tamizh Iyakkam' can be translated literally as 'separate Tamil movement'. Its apparent manifestation was linguistic separatism or 'a movement towards purification of Tamil'. Its political and cultural dimensions take off from this crucial point of difference. The origin of this movement is romanticized by Tirunavukkarasu in his biographies of both Neelambikai Ammaiyar and Maraimalai Adigal. To quote him from his book 'Neelambikai Ammaiyar':

*"1916. Neelambikai may have been around thirteen years of age. One evening father and daughter were walking in the garden. Neela sang the song composed by Ramalinga Adigal which begins with the stanza:*

*'Even if the child forgets its mother or  
the mother the child born from her womb,  
Even if the life spirit forgets the body,  
Or the body its life force.....'  
The learned heart its learning  
The eyes forget to blink  
I will never forget Namashivaya  
Which shines forth in the hearts of sages.'*

Adigalar interrupted the singer to ask 'Neela, do you not think that this poem would sound so much better if the Sanskritic (vadachol) word deham was replaced by the Tamil word yakkai?' ...At this juncture Neela said with spirit, 'let's from this moment give up the use of Sanskritic words and expunge them from our vocabulary. Let's learn to speak in pure Tamil. Her father immediately changed his Sanskritic name Swami

Vedachalam ('*Swami of the Unshakeable Mountain*') to the Tamil version Maraimalai Adigal."

(p.13 of Tirunavukkarasu's *Neelambikai Ammaiyar*. Translation mine)

The Tani Tamizh Iyakkam by its attack on Sanskrit/Hindi logically extended its struggle to encompass anti-Brahmanism in all its manifestations. It therefore became associated with the South Indian Liberation Front started in 1916 which then led on to the foundation of the Justice Party, the Dravida Kazhagam etc. The Justice Party with its anti-Hindi anti-Brahmanical programme formed the government in Tamil Nadu after the 1920 elections. The Self-Respect Movement of E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker followed immediately after. Ironically both the words 'svaya' and 'mariyadai' meaning 'self' 'respect' are Sanskritic in origin! E.V.Ramaswami Naicker in spearheading a movement for the self respect of those he called the indigenous Tamils discarded the negative description of them as non-Brahmins, a description which still moves within the Brahmins and the Other polarity and instead popularised the notion of 'Dravida'.

In attacking Brahmins he also attacked patriarchal institutions perceived as social representations of Brahmanism. It is noteworthy that it was at the First Tamil Women's Conference (Tamil Nattu Perumagalir Manadu) held on 13 November 1938 that its chairperson Neelambikai Ammaiyar conferred on E.V.Ramaswami Naicker the title of 'Periyar' in recognition of his support to women's causes. Both 'Viduthalai' and 'Kudiarasu', the journals run by Periyar carried fiery articles by him like 'Why did Women Become Enslaved?'<sup>12</sup> He argued that it was the emergence of private property that led to a situation in which women themselves became property (Anandi:1991:25). He also condemned in print the despicable practice of old men marrying young girls.

Yet Periyar's life itself seem to contradict these principles when he married Maniamma, a party worker young enough to be his daughter.

A short story by Neelambikai's contemporary Tamarai Kanni Ammaiyar was in fact a apocryphal representation of this incident (Lakshmi:1984:78). The disenchantment with Periyar led to women like Moovalur Ramamritham Ammaiyar who had been a staunch supporter breaking away.<sup>13</sup> Neelambikai Ammaiyar and the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam also parted ways with Periyar although neither biography written by Tirunavukkarasu, either that of Neelambikai Ammaiyar or of Maraimalai Adigal, goes into the cause of the rupture.<sup>14</sup> It is not unlikely that this as well as the larger issue of his distancing himself from gender issues especially the Devadasi bill influenced Neelambikai's disenchantment with the Periyar movement.

A major factor in the parting of ways was perhaps the avowed atheism of the Svaya Mariyadai Iyakkam in contrast to the strong religious foundations of the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam. Both Maraimalai Adigal and his daughter Neelambikai were steeped in Saiva Siddhanta philosophy as well as the devotional aspects of the Bhagavata movement such as the singing of Tevaram and Tiruvachagam hymns. The iconoclastic acts of the Periyar group such as garlanding the image of Ram with slippers must have offended the religious sensibilities of Neelambikai as well as her father. It is significant that out of the fifteen essays in the 'Tani Tamizh Katturaigal' not one is a direct attack on Brahmins although both Brahmanical rituals and Sanskritic textual traditions are under fire.

The hagiographical and utterly inadequate biography of Tirunavukkarasu leaves out both the celebration of E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker's movement by Neelambikai by

conferring on him the title of 'Periyar' at the women's conference in 1938 and the break with his Svaya Mariyadai Iyakkam that followed soon after. What he does talk about at great length is her religiosity and her pilgrimages to renown Saivite shrines in Mylapur (the Kapaleesvara temple where her marriage took place in 1927) Tiruvanmaiur, Trisulam, Tiruvorriyur, Tirukalahasti and Kanchipuram (pp.33-34; 48-50 etc). Her differences with Periyar are in many ways obvious although unstated by the biographer.

The tension with Periyar is cradled within larger complexities in the relationship between movements like the Svaya Mariyadai Iyakkam and the Dravidian movement and Tamil women like Neelambikai, trapped between the public and the private domain. Women within the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam had a predominant concern with Tamil identity and Dravidian renaissance. The spin off from these primary concerns was the rejection of Brahmanical/Sanskritic patriarchy. At the same time they faced the immediate problem of negotiating between political and social activism on the one hand and their own location and role as mothers/wives/daughters-in-law within Tamil patriarchal society. The idea of wholly 'liberated' Tamil women therefore becomes an oxymoron for Neelambikai as well as for many of her contemporaries given their own placement within the patriarchal structure.

This social predicament formed the unfortunate basis for the parting of ways between Neelambikai and her father Maraimalai Adigal. The early chapters of her biography written by her brother Tirunavukkarasu, glorify the father-daughter relationship. It says that she met and fell in love with V. Tiruvarangam Pillai (referred to as 'Aranganar') in 1918 with the blessings of her father who hailed him as "the sixty

fourth Adiyar” (p.11 of the biography. The reference is to the 63 Saivite Nayanar). However the professional relationship between the two men soured over the publication of some of Adigal’s articles on *Tiruvachagam* by Aranganar’s publishing firm. Maraimalai Adigal forbade their marriage and Aranganar went away to Tirunelveli where he started the ‘Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam’ in 1920 which continues to be one of the oldest and most respectable publishing firms in Tamil Nadu.

For nearly ten years Neelambi Ammaiyar was not allowed to meet her fiancé. It was however during these years that her father encouraged her to write articles in Tani Tamizh which were published in various journals like *Dravidan*, *Deshabhimani*, *Anandabodhini*, *Ottrumai* and *Tamilnad*. These were eventually published in 1925 as *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal* in 1925. The biographer says that she spent the nine years between 1918 and 1927 in teaching in various schools, writings and going on pilgrimages. It was also during these years that she developed chronic asthma, which today is seen as a psychosomatic illness and may have been occasioned by her personal frustrations. In the teeth of Maraimalai Adigal’s opposition she and Aranganar got married in 1927 in the Mylapur Kapaleesvaram temple. The biographer writes that the marriage had the blessing of her father (p.37). Thiru Muthukumaraswami the son in law of Subbaiyya Pillai contradicted this in an interview (interview with the author, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2002) categorically stating that Maraimalai Adigal refused to even attend her wedding despite being in the same town and it was K.Subhramanya Pillai who blessed her marriage. After marriage Neelambikai moved with her husband to Tirunelveli and it was the Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam started by her husband which published twelve of her books.

Neelambikai lived another eighteen years after her marriage. The biography says nothing of the relationship between the co-founders of the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam, post Neelambikai marriage. It was Neelambikai's sister in law Mangaiyarkarasiyar who at 86 recalled that father and daughter never met after her marriage. Her mother seems to have seen her twice (Interview with the author 9<sup>th</sup> December 2002). The startling truth is present as a sub-text in an appendix to the biography of Tiruvarangam Pillai by Pulavar R.IIankumaran (*Kazhaga Amaichar Tiruvaranganar varalaru* published by the *Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam*, 1982). The appendix is a five line condolence letter written by Maraimalai Adigal in 1945 to his son Tirunavukkarasu, Neelambikai's brother and biographer. Formal in tone, it acknowledges the receipt of the letter informing him of "your sister Neelambal's death". It is clear that he had not visited her at her bedside during her prolonged illness. Nor does the letter even acknowledge Neelambikai as his daughter (p.121 of Aranganar's biography). It is amazing that Tirunavukkarasu's biography which lauds the support the father extended to his daughter (pp.55-56 ff) nowhere mentions this surgical break between the two!

### **Negotiating Multiple Identities:**

To conclude, Neelambikai Ammaiyar's life and times which comes through diverse discourses, the writings of others as well as her own highly subjective biographies, is a textured one. Her life provides us with a rich historical tapestry of multiple identities, emotional tensions and cultural negotiations. The Tani Tamizh Iyakkam which foregrounds the life of Neelambikai reflects the deep seated anxiety of the Tamils to re-assert their identity in their life and in their writings in the wake of onslaughts on their culture both from English colonialism from outside and Hindi domination from within.

In her persona, writings and politics Neelambikai becomes the cultural site of fragmented identities and emotional negotiations, representing in a microcosm the larger predicament of Tamil women in those historic years of transition.

Neelambikai as a product of cultural pastiche, appears to be the site of ambivalences and paradoxes both at the personal and at the political level. Yet she had clearly generated a space within her mind which enabled her to engage with an extremely complex situation of imperial dominance, Brahmanical hegemony and patriarchal oppression without opting out of her own location within the Tamil patriarchal framework. Given my own feminist logic when I repeatedly asked Neelambikai's biographer Sharada Nambiarooran and others whether repeated child birth (which eventually led to her premature death) did not indicate sexual exploitation, the unequivocal response was an emphatic 'no'. She was a happily married woman and people spoke of them as an ideal couple (Interview with Mangaiyarkkarasiyar, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2002). Yet the same informant told me that Neelambikai never wore a tali which is a symbol of the marital status which every Tamil women must wear! This seeming paradox seems to have found an uneasy coexistence in Neelambikai Ammaiyar. Clearly, for Neelambikai and her ilk, the journey towards personhood—being human, being a woman and being a Tamil—lay through untrodden paths confronting these intrepid travelers!

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**End Notes:**